

Testimony in favor of HB 586, February 19, 2007

By: Wade Sikorski

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Members of the committee: My name is Wade Sikorski. My family has a ranch in Fallon County. As I discovered some years ago when my uncle and I returned to the ranch in our Cessna 172 from taking my grandmother to the airport, we live directly downwind of the Colstrip power plants.

It was winter, and a fresh layer of snow had fallen overnight. A couple of miles downwind of the Colstrip plant, I noticed a strange shadow extending out in a cone from the Colstrip plant in the snow. Outside the cone, the snow was sparkling white; inside the cone, a darker shadow covered the land. From the air, it was stark, unmistakable, and staggering in its extent. It continued all the way to the North Dakota border, where the line in the snow eventually faded. I couldn't believe my eyes because I couldn't imagine what could cause it. But then I realized the snow was tainted with fallout from the Colstrip plants. Our ranch was right in the middle of the opening cone.

When the representatives from the Colstrip power plants testified before the Board of Environmental Review this summer against regulations controlling mercury emissions, they said that mercury emissions from the Colstrip power plants did not land in Montana, that mercury emissions were a global problem, not a local one. That simply isn't true. I saw it with my own eyes. It is landing in Montana, and in particular, it is landing on my family's ranch.

I believe that the evidence shows that the health of children has already been harmed by emissions from Colstrip. According to some statistics that I got off of DPHHS's website for county health profiles, in Montana there are 10 counties with high incidences of birth defects, and all but 1 of them, Liberty County, which is up by the Canadian border, are clustered around each other in southeastern Montana. These are the counties in southeastern Montana that have elevated birth abnormality rates: Bighorn 16%, Carter 21%, Custer 34%, Dawson 17%, Fallon 26%, Garfield, 31%, Powder River 25%, Prairie 34%, and Rosebud 20%. Except for Liberty, which had 15%, all of the other counties in Montana were either 10% or lower, with most of them coming in around 7%. The average for all of Montana is 8%. So, counties in southeastern Montana had about 3 times as many abnormal births as counties in the other 3 quadrants of Montana.

It strikes me as outrageous⁸ that people living downwind of coal plants in Montana are forced to suffer increased health risks for something they do not benefit from. As the executives from Colstrip testified before the board of environmental review, most of the power generated at Colstrip goes out of state. My family and our neighbors should not be forced to take on additional health risks for the financial benefit of out-of-state companies and out-of-state customers. Please make Colstrip reduce its mercury emissions.